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Resounding Rhetoric, Retreating Rebels: The use and impact of militant Speeches in Tamil Dalit Movements

Abstract: Oratory is an important aspect of Tamil culture and people delight in the poetic flourishes of podium speakers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the leader of the largest Dalit movement in Tamilnadu is revered for linguistic prowess. The significance of movement utterances, however, extends beyond content and style. In recent decades Dalit rhetoric has increasingly promised to 'hit back'. Though these perorations have been credited with instilling a sense of pride, courage and assertiveness into previously submissive social groups (cf. Omvedt 2003) such analyses often take movement oratory at face value. A more contextualised reading of such speech-acts reveals that whilst 'hitting back' can restore a sense of pride it can also undermine Dalit agency by reinforcing their characterisation as victims. In a vicious circle radical rhetoric stokes the fires of caste conflict which inspires further tales of victimisation. Celebrations of Dalit lyricism, therefore, need to be tempered by an appreciation of its context and consequences.

'We should salute the militancy of the Tamil struggle and recognize the justice in Thirumavalavan's slogan 'Hit Back' (Omvedt 2003: xxiii).

Introduction

In recent decades Dalit (formerly Untouchable) movements in Tamilnadu, the southernmost state of India, have mobilised effectively against caste discrimination. In the 1980s Dalit groups directly confronted untouchability by walking down high caste streets, demanding service at tea-shops and entering temple precincts. Their activist successors now threaten to retaliate against casteist aggression. The militant rhetoric of contemporary Dalit movements, which promises to 'hit back', is credited by Omvedt with instilling pride and self-belief amongst the downtrodden.

Numerous scholars, activists and commentators echo Omvedt's sanguine analysis. Citing caste clashes, in which both upper-castes and Dalits died, Professor Gnanasekaran, a Social Historian from Neyveli University, proclaimed: 'we are no longer slaves' (Dalit Resource Centre Seminar, September 1999). Reverend Kumbarmanikam, a Church of South India pastor, likewise insisted that militancy is 'a necessary stage – a sort of counselling process rather than violence. To raise social consciousness we need a hit for a hit, and eye for an eye. Is this violence or justice?' (Interview, 5th October 1999). The Liberation Panthers (LPs), the most popular Tamil Dalit movement, were regarded as fuelling Dalit resistance with radical rhetoric, particularly the speeches of their leader Thirumavalavan.

During the LPs first foray into electoral politics, Tamil language magazines profiled Thirumavalavan as a visionary (Kaasi 1999), a 'new star in Tamil politics' (Venkatesan 1999), and the proponent of 'radical ideas and tendencies' (Dhamarajan 1999). All the articles discussed the violence of

some LP actions but the strategic use of militancy to gain media and public exposure is common in Tamilnadu (Gorringe 2005a). The other inescapable feature is the leader's oratory. The admiration for Thirumavalavan's 'fiery rhetoric' was best captured during the 1999 elections when the Tamil magazine *Kalki* reported: 'Even without speaking, Moopanar [leader of the Tamil State Congress (TMC) which the LP's were allied to] is gathering crowds' (Priyan & Venkatesh 1999). The article portrayed people thronging to hear Thirumavalavan's lyrical speeches.

Unsurprisingly, these views are entrenched amongst LP adherents. As Sekhar, a young man living on an encroached shrine forecourt put it: 'the Liberation Panther's leader is Thirumavalavan. It is only after joining this movement that we can be here undisturbed' (Interview 22nd March 1999). Anandan is an articulate and educated Dalit youth living in a Madurai estate, his rationale for joining the LPs was typical: 'It is a good movement, working for the people. A movement which neither depends upon nor trusts the government ... [with] the best leader in Tamilnadu – one can't find another like him!' (Interview 23rd March 1999).

The emphasis on the leader fosters two movement mythologies: the first is that a protest group is a unitary entity best represented by the convenor. The second is that the leaders' speeches are constitutive of the movement. These twin fallacies have resulted in research that over-privileges the utterances of leading performers and neglects the contested processes which characterise any social collective. Such approaches often take perorations out of context, but 'a rhetorical perspective', 'requires the ethnographer to attend not just to the structures of culture, but also to the flow of events' (Carrithers 2005: 582).

This paper offers a contextualised account of Dalit oratory, charting the relational nature of movement speeches rather than reading them as texts. In considering the context of their emergence, the cultural parameters within which they operate and the impact they have I argue against an uncritical celebration of LP rhetoric (eg. Omvedt 2003). This paper begins by outlining the context of the research and reviewing the literature on protest rhetoric and Tamil politics before analysing Panther narratives.

The Rhetorical Context

Post-colonial Tamil Dalit movements developed later than counterparts in India (Gorringe 2005a), but since the 1990s they have demanded full citizenship, access to public space and a place in political institutions.¹ One of the consequences of this upsurge has been an unintended animation of caste spirit. Dalits constitute one of several caste blocks using ascriptive ties for electoral and legislative gain. This competition has had two problematic

outcomes for Dalit rights: Firstly, the deployment of caste discourse has fractured the cross-caste category of 'Dalit' by engendering particularist forms of mobilisation (Gorringer 2005b). Secondly, the accentuation of caste pride has pitted upwardly mobile groups against each other and prompted a violent backlash against 'uppity' Dalits (Vincentnathan 1996).

This context - where Dalit attempts to secure entitlements are met with physical attacks, social boycotts and ostracism (Vincentnathan 1996) - explains the resonance of the slogan 'hit back'. As S. Martine, an activist and advocate, argues: 'you must understand that their [Dalits'] instincts and creativity have been killed. He (sic) thinks that he is nobody. He has lost his identity. The challenge is to make this lion active, but this will be a slow process' (Interview 18th January 1999). Where the primary objectives of protest are psychological, or material objectives are perceived to be unobtainable, 'angry rhetoric may prove a desirable quality' (Lipsky 1968: 1149). It suggests strength and agency by repudiating a dominant culture.

Lipsky rightly notes that such protest strategies are formed in interaction with the protest constituency, the intended target (or reference publics) and various communications media (1968: 1147). Rhetoric is shaped not merely by instrumental consideration of competing claims, however, but by the culture within which claims-making occurs (cf. Carrithers 2005). Tamil discourse, as Ramaswamy observes, 'draws upon linguistic and cultural habits (ingrained in affective figures of speech, rhetorical devices, and so forth) to which a Tamil speaking audience would respond' (1993: 689). The history of linguistic nationalism means that kudos is attached to those capable of speeches in 'beautiful Tamil', and Thirumavalavan's oratory was central to LP success.

Mobilisation around Tamil, thus, offers the LPs a repertoire of tactics and legitimising narratives, but also acts as a constraint (cf. Tilly 1986). The pre-eminence of 'Mother Tamil' (Ramaswamy 1993) minimises pan-Indian 'Dalit' mobilisation and has directed the LPs towards alliances with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Backward Caste *Paatali Makkal Katchi* (PMK - The Toiling People's Party) in Tamilnadu. Neither outfit shares the Panthers' objectives or rationale. Indeed, the LPs emerged in opposition to the Vanniyar centred PMK.

Ramaswamy notes the potential for linguistic nationalism to 'weave together Tamilians-as-children and their language-as-mother into emotive webs of attachment, loyalty and love' (1993: 689). Dalit leaders have arguably been seduced by this possibility which opens doors to powerful allies and a culturally valorised rhetoric of contention. For all the sound-bites about social justice, however, these allies have not been committed to a caste-free society

(Rajadurai and Geetha 1996). The celebration of Mother Tamil has other insidious effects, as not all Dalits speak Tamil and the idioms most Dalits use are socially despised. The celebration of Tamil through the figure of Mother Tamil is also replete with gendered assumptions, as was apparent in the actions of the Tamil Protection Movement (set up by the LPs and PMK) in 2004. The TPM's volatile response to a Hindi actress' comments about chastity revealed an attempt to impose a paternalist (and implicitly casteist) idea of virtue onto Tamil women (cf. Anandhi 2005).

The socio-political context affects the language in which demands are expressed, but also shapes organisational and campaign traits. The legacy of kingship, for instance, helps explain the propensity for leader-centred mobilisation (Price 1989). Mines (1994) refers to such figures as 'big men' and notes how intricate systems of patronage affect group organisation and colour people's sense of self. These widespread understandings of 'good leadership' channel movements in certain directions and foreclose others. In contemporary Tamilnadu, thus, movements cannot neglect caste and face a closed political system that emerging groups have had to gain access to through extra-institutional action (Gorringe 2005a & b).

Rhetoric and Radicalism

Shorn of this context, the speeches of activists are difficult to comprehend. They should not be taken-as-read but understood as contextualised responses. Conversely, an over-emphasis on local context can obscure the parallels between Dalit and other social movements, analysis of which can illuminate the practices, processes and purposes of speech-acts. Rhetoric, as Jasper (1997: 273) observes, 'is the main tool with which activists "create" or collect new grievances, resources and constituents'. It is, Lipsky (1968) argued, especially important for marginalised groups who lack other means of effecting social change.

Movement speeches encourage belonging (Della Porta and Diani 1999), and movement cohesion is 'created, expressed, and made real through discourse' (Fine 1995: 128). Fine views movements as a '*bundle of narratives*' through which common identities are constructed. Rhetorical flourishes, thus, speak volumes about the aims, objectives and modus operandi of protest groups. This is the premise of much frame-analysis which understands movement discourses and cultures as the instrumental creations of activists seeking to reach potential supporters or targets. A frame, here, refers to 'a mental structure that organis[es] perception and interpretation' (Johnston 1995: 217). It connotes the manner in which social movement actors package reality.

Social movement frames shape how an audience views the world and seek to render specific grievances widely meaningful to maximise mobilisation. Such frames, Snow and Benford (1988) note, assume three general forms: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational (in Buechler 2000: 41). Diagnostic frames identify problems and their causes. Prognostic frames outline forms of remedial action, and motivational frames imbue an issue with urgency and impress an audience with the necessity for action (ibid.). Activist analyses, however, may not be echoed by non-participants and so movement communication is often geared towards persuading a wider public (Jasper 1997). This may be done through publicity aimed at likeminded but inactive citizens, by linking movement stories to pre-existing frames (eg. adopting the language of Tamil nationalism) or through the creation new attitudes and values (eg. an emphasis on human rights or citizenship).

Frame analysis illuminates movement strategies, but it retains a focus on rational, resource maximising actors. As Steinberg (2002: 208) argues, this restricts our understanding of movement culture and blinds us to the interactive nature of protest. Dissident discourses as both Steinberg (2002) and Naples (2002) note are not divorced from hegemonic narratives but may borrow from and be shaped by them. Furthermore, any 'speech situation', as Johnston (1995: 222) insists, is bound by specific social rules about what is or is not appropriate in a given context. It is essential, therefore, to understand the tacit assumptions underpinning rhetoric.

The ubiquity of movement speeches has led researchers to view speech-acts as significant in themselves (Melucci 1996, Jasper 1997), but protest discourse has material effects extending beyond the meaning of particular speeches. Naples (2002: 244), for instance, notes how the rhetoric of 'community' in the Civil Rights struggle marginalised women's voices. Frame analysts' emphasis on the instrumental actions of activists, obscures 'how the potential audience reacts' (Aguirre in Buechler 2000: 42). Responding to Steinberg's call for a more 'dialogic analysis [which] focuses our attention on culture as a set of practices that occurs *between* power holders and challengers, sympathizers, authorities and other groups' (2002: 224), we can look not only at what the Panthers say but what shapes their rhetoric and what impact it has.

Roaring Panthers?

My initial impression of the LPs was of impassioned actors determined to overcome social discrimination, and the framing perspective seemed to explicate the narratives of contention deployed by activists and demagogues. Fine's (1995: 135) analysis of narrative culture highlights three broad types of movement story: 'Horror stories' (detailing abuses perpetrated against activists), 'war stories' (that fostered a sense of us against them) and 'happy

endings' (which offer examples of movement achievements). These loosely correspond to the diagnostic, motivational and prognostic frames above but seem more appropriate. In 1999, horror and war stories were abundant and often overlapped, but happy endings had to be contrived. Whilst the analytical utility of this schema is questionable, the basic categorisation offers some coherence to otherwise disparate speeches. The paper examines examples of each type of narrative before offering a more nuanced analysis.

Horror Stories

In 1999, the mobilisation of the Liberation Panthers peaked. They were the most popular Tamil Dalit movement and mounted a credible challenge to political and caste associations. This popularity stemmed from effective organisation, fiery rhetoric and a refusal to bow to pressure. Consequently, the LPs became a target for repression. The creation of LP outposts stirred up caste animosity even as the government portrayed them as extremists, denied permission for rallies and justified preventative arrests of activists (Gorringer 2005a). Faced by repressive reactions and alienated from potential sympathisers due to their characterisation as militants the LPs faced decline.

Recounting the litany of abuses perpetrated against Dalits achieved the dual objective of legitimising LP activism and casting others as the real 'fanatics'. Audiences were not spared gruesome details and the perorations were clearly intended to shock listeners, harden the resolve of activists and shame the government into action. Some atrocities were well known and needed little elaboration, but other cases only became common knowledge through movement meetings. Highlighting lesser known incidents depicted the known traumas as part of a systemic pattern of caste abuse, and they were carefully selected to maximise outrage. Most speeches related atrocities against women but accounts of state connivance and inaction or of the brutality of other castes were also common. The following description of a vicious murder is typical:

In Melapadi village, Cuddalore District, a girl named Sugunthala was very violently raped. Her breasts were chopped off, her face torn beyond recognition and wooden stakes were forced into her vagina. In such violent manner was she murdered, but that murder, Karunanidhi's police recorded, is 'open to doubt'. ... A woman named Ponnurrivi was violently raped and killed. That incident too was registered as suspected suicide. What devilry is occurring under this Karunanidhi government? (Thirumavalavan, Speech 13/07/1999).

Speeches listed multiple victims to highlight endemic casteism, but movement diatribes are not objective bulletins. The emphasis on rapes, crimes against

women and the treatment of female relatives of victims is not accidental. Sexual violence *is* a weapon in caste conflict, but focussing on such atrocities in public speeches highlights the innocence of Dalit victims and acts as a spur to Dalit men. *Maanam* (honour) is incredibly important in Tamil culture and hegemonic Tamil masculinity is bound up with questions of honour and shame in which the (in)ability to defend ones women from attack plays a central role (Gorringe 2006).

Even old horrors were retold to foreground honour and self-esteem. The Melavalavu massacre, thus, has been endlessly recounted. The murder of a panchayat (village council) president and six followers in broad daylight in 1997 encapsulates the necessity of struggle. On the second anniversary of the massacre, however, Thirumavalavan emphasised continuing injustices and affronts to Dalit pride. He noted that though Murugesan, the panchayat president, was a member of the ruling party the Chief Minister neglected his bereaved family.

Not only did he not visit the families to ease their suffering, now he has given jobs to the women of the seven families. Do you know what sort of work? In the blazing sun they are now working as road-layers and unskilled labourers on the very road where their husbands were attacked and blood was shed. On the ground steeped in blood, on that road, while going back and forth along that piece of road, how many times each day do they reflect over the incident in distress? (Thirumavalavan Speech 30/06/1999).

Adding insult to injury hardens resolve and justifies protest. The governing party here is, perhaps, guilty of thoughtlessness, but other stories identify state authorities as primary aggressors. The baton-charge in Tirunelveli in 1999 when unarmed protestors were driven into a river where 17 people lost their lives is an exemplar:

Those workers were beaten till they fled unable to bear the violence, they fled from the firing, they fled unable to withstand the teargas, unable to bear the kicks and trampling of the police they leapt into the river to save themselves. They say people jumped into the water – the police drove them into it. There, those unable to swim rose up and were hit again, beaten down till they could no longer stand. See the news. I am not lying - I have no need to lie (Firebrand Murugan Speech 04/08/1999).

The last sentence touches on the issue of veracity since activists may exaggerate to make a point, but horror stories need to be credible to inspire

protest. Some events, such as the above, are well documented. Other accounts, however, require great detail or reference to external sources (First Information Reports, newspaper articles, NGO bulletins) to display knowledge. Such detail is imperative when speakers vilify the state or powerful social groups since they may alienate listeners. Alternatively, ‘grievance extension’ (Jasper 1997: 273) - the attempt to present ones’ own struggle as that of other groups – helps to counter isolation:

The BJP [Bharata Janata Party – Hindu Right national political party] is the party upholding the caste system, upholding Varnashramadharma [Caste obligations and rules]. This is the mob, the RSS mob which destroyed the Babri-Masjid mosque which had stood for four hundred years. ... They hold us to be untouchable like leprosy patients and it was they who set alight the vehicle in which the Australian [Reverend Staines – a missionary] and his children were sleeping in Orissa (Thirumavalavan Speech 18/07/1999).

Thirumavalavan here seeks to unite religious minorities and Dalits as common targets of the Hindu-right. Such attempts to transcend the bounds of caste are essential if the horror stories are not to result in a debilitating victim mentality or isolationist militancy. These ‘bridging frames’ facilitate alliances and create the sense of a wider struggle.

War Stories

Such frames are indispensable since horror stories can be disincentives. In foregrounding the dangers attending mobilisation and the slow, often antithetical, processes of social change, they potentially inculcate feelings of disempowerment. ‘War stories’, by contrast, bolster participation by creating an ‘us-against-them’ mentality and sense of collective responsibility. Where accounts of atrocities individualise discrimination, war stories emphasise the collective dimensions of caste, noting that Dalits are targeted and neglected by the state as a *category* not as individuals:

Today our cheris [Dalit residential areas] are being burnt and our assets ransacked. Were the police to take strict action why would we protest? (Thirumavalavan, Speech 13/07/1999).

Such stories make clear that Dalits are singled out:

What sort of government is this? Whoever asks for permission to stage a demonstration it is granted, but the downtrodden alone are refused such permission! (Firebrand Murugan Speech 30/06/1999)

It is important, here, to enquire why particular motives are articulated. Contrary to popular perceptions (best seen in uncritical discussions of ‘vote-banks’) movements based on ascriptive categories such as caste, still need to be constructed. Dalits are divided along caste lines and there is little internal solidarity even within caste. Furthermore, social movements operating at state or national level must knit local groups together. Speeches attempt to render a categorical identity meaningful to people in their daily lives. Persuading them that they are all potential targets of abuse; that existing institutions are inactive; and that they face common enemies are effective ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Mills 1940).

The example of Kodankipatti was frequently used to illustrate the necessity of struggle. Dalits here were forced from their homes in 1990 and again in 1999 by upper-caste villagers (cf. Gorringer 2005a: 350). Lest the audience blame the victims for this expulsion we are told of their institutional engagement:

How many times did our comrades [in Kodankipatti] inform the police and ask them to take action? They told the inspector, they went to inform the DSP [Deputy Superintendent of Police], they told the SP, they told the official directly above him – the DIG [Deputy Inspector General]. They even told the official above him – the Southern Districts Inspector General. Over and above all of these, they even informed the protector of the law; the District Collector. Is this ... Government that could not protect cheri people despite innumerable warnings the government you need? (Thirumavalavan Speech 30/06/1999).

Furthermore, state authorities are not simply inept; they are antithetical to the downtrodden:

Wherever cheris have been attacked ... The police know full well. If you ask why they remain silent and inactive? We do not have political power; we do not have great strength; there is no big organisation behind us; there are no big leaders to press our case and ask questions of such incidents. And so they do not concern themselves about us. They can oppress us, suppress us, kill us, plunder us, commit all sorts of violence! The caste fanatics have this background. It is this background that the police are scared of (Thirumavalavan Speech 16/06/1999).

Clearly, failing institutions of interest mediation leave little option but to protest (Scott 1991). Negative campaigning, however, has limited potential if

only because of the constant reminders of violence. Even war stories, therefore, played on people's aspirations and concerns for future generations:

The innocent children playing here in the dust today - These guileless, defenceless children should not be enslaved in future. They should not, like us, be imprisoned in cheris. They need to live from generation to generation with all benefits and every freedom. It is to protect their future that we need to make sacrifices today (Thirumavalavan Speech 18/07/1999).

There is an implicit assertion of the power of protest here to inspire participation, but sympathisers need more than negative inducements.

Happy Endings

'Happy endings' aid mobilisation, Fine (1995) remarks, but in a context marked by caste tensions they were few and far between. This scenario epitomises the free-rider problem; the question of why rational actors undertake the costs of protest for common goods. If the LPs succeed all Dalits will benefit so why protest? Resource Mobilisation Theorists focus on the potential material benefits, but this flattens the social world to cost-benefit calculations and ignores emotions, friendships and moral beliefs even though people mobilise around the less tangible 'goods' of doing the right thing or revealing hidden abuses (Jasper 1997). For the LPs rewards were negligible and costs high, so means of inspiring commitment had to be contrived. A common trope was to invoke struggles of the past, but when successes are negligible movement orators look further afield:

Nelson Mandela – for the people of South Africa, for black people's freedom - spent 26 years (sic) in prison and emerged with the same courage, with added valour to gain the freedom of the people and seized the reins of power. Having seen and followed this, the prison cell holds no fear for us any more (Thirumavalavan Speech 18/07/1999).

Mandela was seen as exemplifying the power of sustained protest. The LTTE in Sri Lanka were a reference point, as was Ambedkar – the foremost Untouchable leader of the 20th Century – but movements need to persuade potential adherents of their own efficacy so recounting the glories of others was insufficient:

They say we are an extremist organisation – we are extremists: we are extreme in the manner in which we protest for our people's rights, we are extreme in our attempts to organise, we are radical in

our attempts to reveal the wrongdoings of governments and politicians (Saktivel Speech 18/07/1999).

Such speeches portray the LPs as working tirelessly for social justice and are complemented by an emphasis on their impact:

To condemn the atrocity ... one lakh Viduthalai Chiruthaigal [Liberation Panther] cadres rallied together in a manner in which the city of Chennai trembled and suffocated ... On our dais, with our limitations and resources we gave compensation of Rs 10,000 each to the three families. Only after that the government decided to give solatium to those three aggrieved families (Thirumavalavan 2004: 35-6).

Occasionally, LPs claimed to have prevented upper caste aggression, secured land deeds or brought guilty parties to book. More often, as seen above, the movement was confined to publicising atrocities and seeking compensation for victims or their families – hardly an inducement to action. Movement speeches, here, reprised notions of honour and self-worth and the virtues of courageous sacrifice:

If one lives one should live like this. Now everyone is starting to hear of [Melavalavu] Murugesan and his struggle to gain liberty for the downtrodden. Posthumously his history has reached multitudes. When Gandhi died nobody spoke about him. When Nehru died Indira Gandhi rose to power and he was forgotten ... Those with no interest in people's liberty leave no trace after their death. Liberation Panthers have no fear of this. If we die in the cause of our people we will remain in the hearts of our comrades (Cinnthanai Selvam Speech 30/06/1999).

The 'happy ending' here is posthumous but, in a culture where individuality is expressed through public action (Mines 1994), the prospect of achieving lasting recognition is attractive. Polarised narratives also aid mobilisation by rationalising the costs of activism. If you can be persecuted simply for being Dalit, then it makes sense to join a campaigning organisation.

Empty Rhetoric or The Power of Words?

The framing perspective foregrounds the agency of activists and reveals how movements articulate their grievances, create collective identity and inspire commitment. It highlights how even oppressed groups are not entirely powerless. Through the judicious use of particular frames and rhetorical tropes they render power visible (Melucci 1996), legitimise rebellion (Della

Porta and Diani 1999), make common cause with others (Jasper 1997) and inspire participation (Beuchler 2000). The focus on talk is a welcome corrective to more materialistic accounts that prioritise resources and rewards. We have seen how even horrific crimes do not 'speak for themselves' but are interpreted and transmitted to maximise impact.

The packaging can vary for each intended audience: war stories rally cadre but are less effectual in widening the struggle. In public rallies, therefore, bridging frames appeal to a larger constituency that cuts across religious, caste and linguistic boundaries, and accounts of state inaction refute the 'militant' tag by indicating attempts to use institutional channels. Horror stories can dishearten activists but can shock bystanders into action. Similarly with 'happy endings'; accounts of Mandela's triumph legitimise extra-institutional action whereas 'hitting-back' can isolate activists (cf. Apter 1997). Fine's (1995) neat descriptive categories seem to resonate here, but the broad-brush categorisation of movement narratives can obscure the processual nature of movement activity.

The framing approach, for instance, says little on how the messages are received or mapped onto action. It also neglects the cultural contexts which render certain frames (im)possible. Given the insights into the way rhetoric is framed for differing audiences these omissions are puzzling. How an argument is received is as, if not more, important than what it intends to convey particularly since, as Apter notes, 'collectivized, stories have consequences' (1997: 12). Thus, while a campaigning academic bemoaned that the LPs 'talk a lot, but they never *do* anything' (Informal Interview 23rd June 1999) and the notion of 'empty rhetoric' is persuasive, Apter's analysis cautions against a simplistic dichotomy between talking and doing.

At the least Dalit speeches compel listeners to confront the persistent caste discrimination, help unify disparate activists and highlight possibilities. Whilst most Dalits do not 'hit back' the articulation of this possibility affects self-esteem, the willingness to accept subordination and inter-caste relations. In this sense, Hunt (1984) argues, 'producing revolutionary talk is as much a part of the revolution as the barricades' (in Johnston & Klandermans 1995: 13). Dalit rhetoric helps invert the stigma associated with untouchability and places caste within a novel interpretive schema.

The dual impact of feeling part of a wider group and the articulation of alternatives may offer sympathisers the courage to resist caste obligations. We can, thus, see how the interpretive schemata established by movements through speech-acts have positive effects, but there were discernible unintended outcomes that are not captured by the typology above. One by-

product of the focus on atrocities and martyrs was the creation of a defensive victim mentality. This was most obviously manifest in the failure of the LPs to develop a transformative project.

Take, for example, the LP's position on women. Dotted through speeches, interviews and manifestoes is a perceptive analysis of the intersection between caste and patriarchy and a commitment to women's rights. These convictions, however, were not systematically structured into movement life. Proactive campaigns focused on righting wrongs rather than prefiguring a more equitable society. This underpins the second notable offshoot of LP framing; the relegation of women to secondary status. The language of honour, pride and shame presents Dalit women as vulnerable victims who need protection. This may be effective in mobilising Dalit men but it sidelines female activists.

There were no major female leaders or parliamentary candidates and precious few orators. Indeed the logic of the frame was compounded when LP Women's Wings led protests against election violence because this reinforced their status as vulnerable. These events implied that violence and intimidation were so prevalent that women were thrust into the frontline as victims (wives of injured or incarcerated men) who were less likely to face state persecution. The twin notions of caste honour and pride, here, created an inequitable gendered division of labour.

This division was reinforced by a third outcome; fiery rhetoric intended for an immediate audience was often reinterpreted and inscribed within different frames. Backward Caste gangs, thus, distorted and took umbrage at the radical declamations of John Pandian (a Dalit leader) and instigated casteist riots (Alm 1996). Likewise, uncompromising LP speeches contributed to caste tensions that spilled over into electoral violence and caste atrocities in 1999. Activists argued that rising violence would be attended by awareness and mobilisation, but in the late 1990s LP oratory outstripped its organisational capacity and their speeches inspired Dalit resistance and Backward Caste retribution in areas without a sustained movement presence. The upshot was to render remote Dalits more vulnerable.

Conclusion

It is Thirumavalavan's single voice, perhaps after Periyar's, that inspires the marginalized to "hit back" (New Sunday Express, Thirumavalavan 2003: Frontispiece).

Whilst the foregoing discussion underscores the necessity for 'dialogic analysis' (Steinberg 2002) this quote encapsulates a tendency to privilege the perorations of leaders. Speeches are read as conveying the stance of a

movement, the intentions of its participants and their interpretation of society. The framing perspective, whilst less crude, similarly neglects the ways in which speeches may be received, translated and reinterpreted (Steinberg 2002, Naples 2002). Movements are presented as unitary entities ignoring the processes of identity formation and mobilisation. No movement, however, is a personal fiefdom – ideas are always contested, challenged and evolve in interaction – and no rhetoric speaks for itself.

This paper has argued for a contextualised reading of oratory which recognises the social character of speech-acts. We have seen that movement rhetoric is constitutive, but not in a direct or uni-linear fashion. A leader neither directs nor embodies a movement through speech. Protest is more dynamic. Speakers must be cognisant of what is culturally acceptable, meaningful and resonant. Likewise they must address the desires and needs of particular audiences to get the message across let alone gain popularity.

A rhetorical perspective, as observed above, compels us to look beyond structures (in this case of caste) to ‘the flow of events’ (Carrithers 2005: 582). It is in the cultural context where radical assertion by ex-untouchables is viewed as inexcusable by higher castes that we can grasp the significance of such utterances (Gorringe 2006). Radical rhetoric may seem like empty posturing, but it has a wider impact on social relations. ‘People do not commit political violence without discourse’, Apter notes, ‘they need to talk themselves into it’ (1997: 2). The militant assertions of the Liberation Panthers do not occur in a vacuum but constitute, challenge and change existing power relationships.

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ⁱ Empirical data was collected in Tamilnadu between 1998-9. The multi-sited ethnography focussed on Dalit movement activists, motivations, modes of operation, and ideological aspirations. The data consists of 30 group discussions, 32 formal and 30 informal interviews with activists, leaders, academics and non-participating Dalits. Interviews were complemented by participant observation.